UTOPIA
THE INFLUENTIAL CLASSIC

UTOPIA
THE INFLUENTIAL CLASSIC
THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

THOMAS MORE
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY NIALL KISHTAINY

Table of Contents

Also available in the same series:

Beyond Good and Evil: The Philosophy Classic

by Friedrich Nietzsche (ISBN: 978-0-857-08848-2)

Meditations: The Philosophy Classic

by Marcus Aurelius (ISBN 978-0-857-08846-8)

On the Origin of Species: The Science Classic

by Charles Darwin (ISBN: 978-0-857-08847-5)

Tao Te Ching: The Ancient Classic

by Lao Tzu (ISBN: 978-0-857-08311-1)

The Art of War: The Ancient Classic

by Sun Tzu (ISBN: 978-0-857-08009-7)

The Game of Life and How to Play It: The Self-Help Classic

by Florence Scovel Shinn (ISBN: 978-0-857-08840-6)

The Interpretation of Dreams: The Psychology Classic

by Sigmund Freud (ISBN: 978-0-857-08844-4)

The Prince: The Original Classic

by Niccolo Machiavelli (ISBN: 978-0-857-08078-3)

The Republic: The Influential Classic

by Plato (ISBN: 978-0-857-08313-5)

The Science of Getting Rich: The Original Classic

by Wallace Wattles (ISBN: 978-0-857-08008-0)

The Wealth of Nations: The Economics Classic

by Adam Smith (ISBN: 978-0-857-08077-6)

Think and Grow Rich: The Original Classic

by Napoleon Hill (ISBN: 978-1-906-46559-9)

The Prophet: The Spiritual Classic

by Kahlil Gibran (ISBN: 978–0–857–08855-0)

The Communist Manifesto: The Political Classic

by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (ISBN: 978–0–857–08876–5)

A Room of One's Own: The Feminist Classic

by Virginia Woolf (978-0-857-08882-6)

Letters from a Stoic: The Ancient Classic

by Seneca (978-1-119-75135-9)

UTOPIA

The Influential Classic

THOMAS MORE

With an Introduction by NIALL KISHTAINY

This edition first published 2021

This Capstone Classics edition of Thomas More's *Utopia* is based on the Gilbert Burnet translation.

The Gutenberg Project: http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2130/pg2130.txt.

The Gutenberg version is drawn from *Sir Thomas More's Utopia. Burnet's Translation*. Edited by Henry Morley. London, Cassell & Company, 1889.

The prefatory letters and other materials are sourced from Open Utopia, edited by Stephen Duncombe, under a creative commons licence: https://theopenutopia.org/home/.

Registered office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book please see our website at www.wiley.com.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

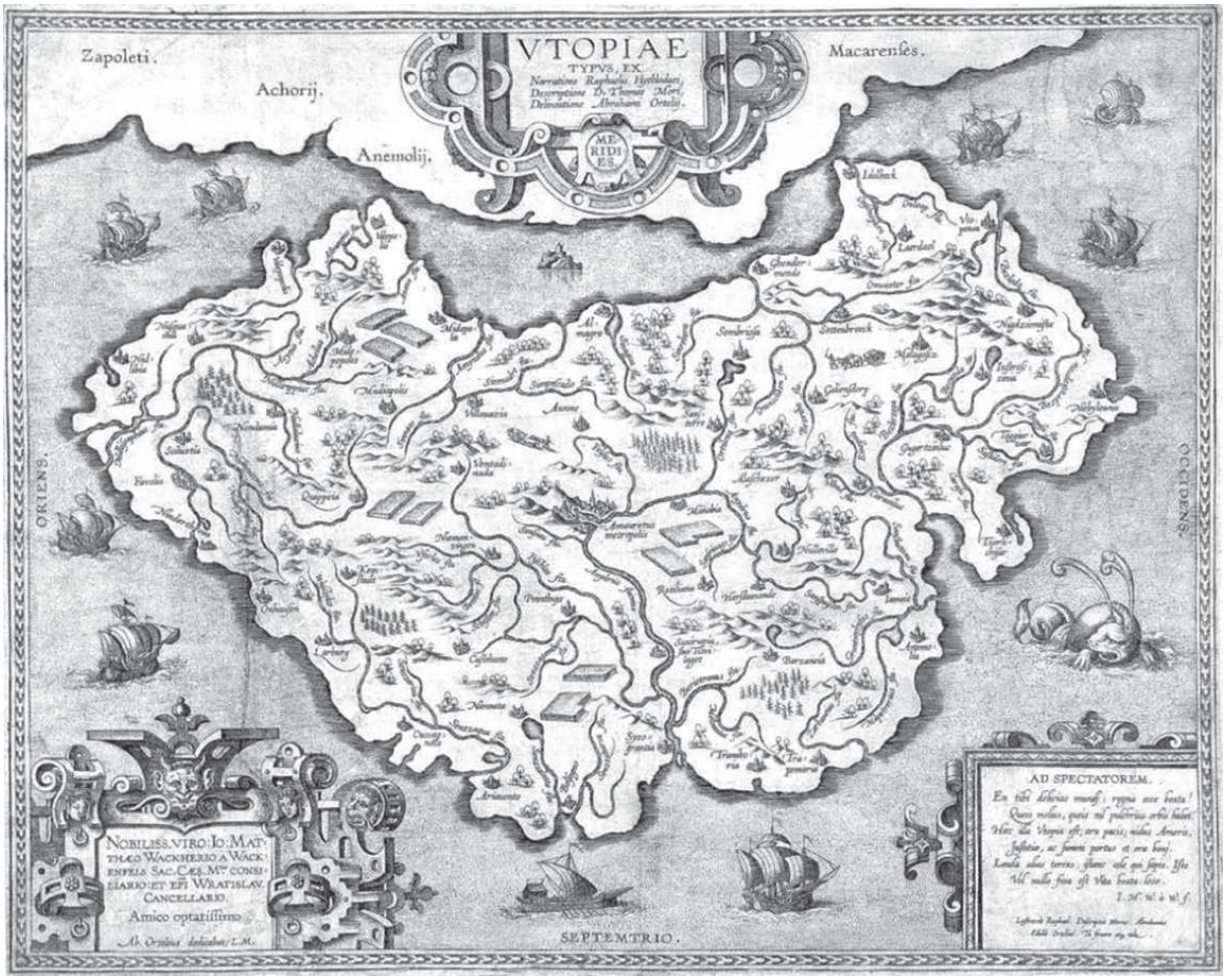
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781119754381 (Cloth)

ISBN 9780857088956 (epdf)

ISBN 9780857088932 (epub)

Cover design: Wiley



Map of Utopia by Abraham Ortelius (1527-1598) circa 1595

AN INTRODUCTION

BY NIALL KISHTAINY

In 1516, a book written in Latin was published with the invented word ‘utopia’ in its title: *Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth, and the New Island of Utopia*. It described an imaginary place, a good society located somewhere in the New World. The book contained a map of a distant island and a translation of a curious alphabet purportedly used by the islanders. *Utopia*, as the book became known, was Thomas More's most famous work and one of the most celebrated of Renaissance Europe.

More was not the first to imagine an alternative civilization: Plato did so in his *Republic*, but More created a literary form that inquired into social conditions using vivid storytelling rather than theory. A poem at the start of the book hails *Utopia's* vision as surpassing Plato's because it goes beyond the abstract: ‘For what Plato's pen has plotted briefly, In naked words, as in a glass, The same have I performed fully, With laws, with men, and treasure fitly.’

More was born in London in 1478 and spent most of his life in the city. He became a lawyer of great distinction and held a variety of posts before becoming secretary to Henry VIII and in 1529, Lord Chancellor. Today he is remembered for his opposition to the king's divorce from Catherine of Aragon, which led to the break from Rome of the English church.

For refusing to bow to the king's wishes, More was executed in 1535. He became a legendary figure in British history, to many a faultless Catholic martyr. In our secular times, we prefer to view him as a hero of conscience who defended individual belief in the face of tyranny. With

Utopia, he is seen as a social prophet whose vision for a better world continues to inspire. More was canonized by the Catholic Church in 1935. In 2000 Pope John Paul II declared him the patron saint of politicians.

THE WRITING OF *UTOPIA*

In 1515, More was sent to Bruges as part of a diplomatic mission charged with settling a trade dispute between England and Flanders. During a lull in the talks, More visited Antwerp where he stayed with the town clerk, Peter Giles, with whom he developed a close friendship. Antwerp was then Europe's leading commercial city, and Giles one of its prominent officials and a highly learned man. The time in Antwerp had a stimulating effect on More. While at leisure there he conceived and began to write *Utopia*.

There appears, therefore, to have been an element of serendipity in the composition of *Utopia*, but in fact the ideas in it had been brewing in More's mind for years. By the time of the Bruges mission, More was a busy lawyer, and was Undersheriff of London. He had become a Member of Parliament and had negotiated on behalf of the Mercers' trading company, which represented wool and cloth merchants. These activities would have made More well aware of the social problems facing Tudor England as its commercial economy grew and traditional ways of life were displaced.

Steeped in theological and classical learning, More had become one of the most brilliant scholars of his day. When a young man, he had caught the attention of England's men of letters by delivering a series of lectures on *The City of God*, the vast work written at the end of the Roman Empire by the early Christian father, St Augustine of Hippo. Augustine's central idea was that of two cities that exist within human society: the worldly city of temporal desire

and sin and the godly city of peace and fulfilment. Augustine was a major influence on More's spiritual development, and the idea of the two cities applied to social questions most likely fuelled the thinking that went into *Utopia*. A few years earlier, More had begun writing *A History of Richard III*, an account of the king whose defeat by Henry Tudor at Bosworth Field ushered in the Tudor reign. Richard's notoriety came in part from More's unflattering portrait of him in this work. Through Richard's story, the book deals with questions of tyranny and of sound kingship.

Utopia, then, was written by a man of considerable intellectual and practical credentials. More knew the law inside out, moved in the highest scholarly and court circles, and in his early works had already begun thinking about the pressing social and political problems of the day. Authors of the utopian tracts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries aimed their works at a wide audience, hoping that their ideas would be adopted in practical programmes of reform. *Utopia*'s sixteenth-century audience was much narrower: the book was written for the elite Latin-speaking scholars of Europe rather than the bakers and butchers of More's daily life in London.

THE ISLAND OF UTOPIA

Utopia takes the form of a traveller's tale told by a seafarer who once chanced upon the island of Utopia. During a series of dialogues with various interlocutors the explorer tells of life on the happy island and makes scathing critiques of English society. The story starts with real events and with More himself, who begins by telling of his mission to Flanders and his journey to Antwerp.

The fiction starts when More recalls one day stepping into the street after Mass and seeing Peter Giles talking to a

sun-beaten mariner. Giles tells him that the man, Raphael Hythloday, is a traveller with amazing tales of far-off lands. The men retire to a garden and Raphael tells More and Giles about his travels generally, his views on the state of contemporary Europe, and about the distant nation of Utopia.

In Raphael's description of Utopia, we encounter a society that in some of its surface features resembles England. For example, like London, Utopia's capital city of Amaurot lies on a hill by a tidal river with a stone bridge over it. But at a deeper level Utopia is an inversion of the societies of England and Europe. In Utopia property is held in common and there is no money. Whenever a family needs food or clothes, the head of the household goes to the city warehouse and takes what is required. The Utopians are a disciplined, frugal people devoted to the higher pleasures of conversation and learning. They have no reason to take more goods than they need, having no desire to flaunt their possessions. Their sturdy houses have no locks on the doors and are exchanged every ten years by lot.

One of the most memorable Utopian customs, used to show the Utopians' rejection of opulence, is the making of chamber pots out of gold and the public shaming of wrongdoers by placing gold crowns on their heads. Pearls and diamonds are given to the children for playthings; they discard the baubles as they grow up.

In Utopia everyone works in the fields or at handicrafts, unlike in Europe where societies are dragged down by the wasteful extravagance and idleness of noblemen and their retainers. Because all lend a hand and there is no need for luxuries, the Utopian working day is short and there is plenty of time left over to engage in learning and contemplation. There are only a few laws, simple enough for everyone to understand, and no lawyers. The Utopians

come together for their meals, during which a morally improving text is read out and discussed. After dinner, the people play music or converse in their gardens.

Utopia ranges over many questions including: war (the Utopians hate the pursuit of military glory that Europe's princes lust after); the qualities of priests (the Utopians' priests are few in number and truly pious, unlike those in Europe); the functioning of politics (aimed at avoiding tyranny); and marriage customs (divorce is allowed in special circumstances and infidelity is punished). But the communal principle of *Utopia* is the big theme that encompasses all of these, and at two places in the book Raphael pauses his travelogue to deliver tirades about the impossibility of justice in societies based on private property. More and Giles raise objections, arguing that without private property society could not function because people would not bother to work. Raphael is undaunted. The rich will always exploit the poor, he says, through private fraud and by capturing the law. Policies to mitigate these defects will never have much of an effect while there is still private property. Raphael hails Utopia as the best commonwealth because with everything held in common everyone is guaranteed their subsistence. The abolition of property and money ends fraud, murder, disorder, and anxiety. What would stop the adoption of utopian arrangements, then? Human pride, which measures fortune by the ill-fortune of others.

UTOPIA AND THE REAL WORLD

Utopia is divided into two books. Book One begins with the fictional More's meeting with Raphael, then leads into a series of dialogues between Raphael, More, and Giles. Raphael's recollections of conversations that he had while visiting England introduce a number of other characters.

These first conversations are not about Utopia directly, the topic of the island appearing almost as an aside.

On hearing Raphael's descriptions of the different societies that he saw during his travels, Giles says that Raphael should become an adviser to a king, where his knowledge could be put to good use. But Raphael says that courts are places of flattery and rigid convention where the ideas of visionary philosophers are misunderstood and ignored. Much of the rest of Book One is a tug of war between Raphael on one side and More and Giles on the other, the latter two pressing the case for public service on the unshakeable Raphael.

During this discussion Raphael reports a conversation that he had in England that shows the futility of serving kings. At a dinner, a lawyer had praised the harsh punishment given to thieves. Raphael replied that such punishments were pointless and wrong because in an unjust society the poor had to steal to survive. Then comes a famous passage in which Raphael identifies another cause of theft: sheep, which in their grazing swallow up people and whole villages. Raphael is condemning the enclosure of land then underway in England in which agricultural common lands were fenced off and turned over to the raising of sheep for the lucrative wool trade. As a result, farming communities were thrown off the fields and into poverty. The lawyer rejects Raphael's argument for less severe punishments, claiming that they would threaten public order. The other guests agree with the lawyer, but when the distinguished master of the house says that Raphael's argument may have merit, they quickly do an about-turn. This, says Raphael, illustrates his point that courts are filled with sycophants who simply parrot what they think their masters want to hear.

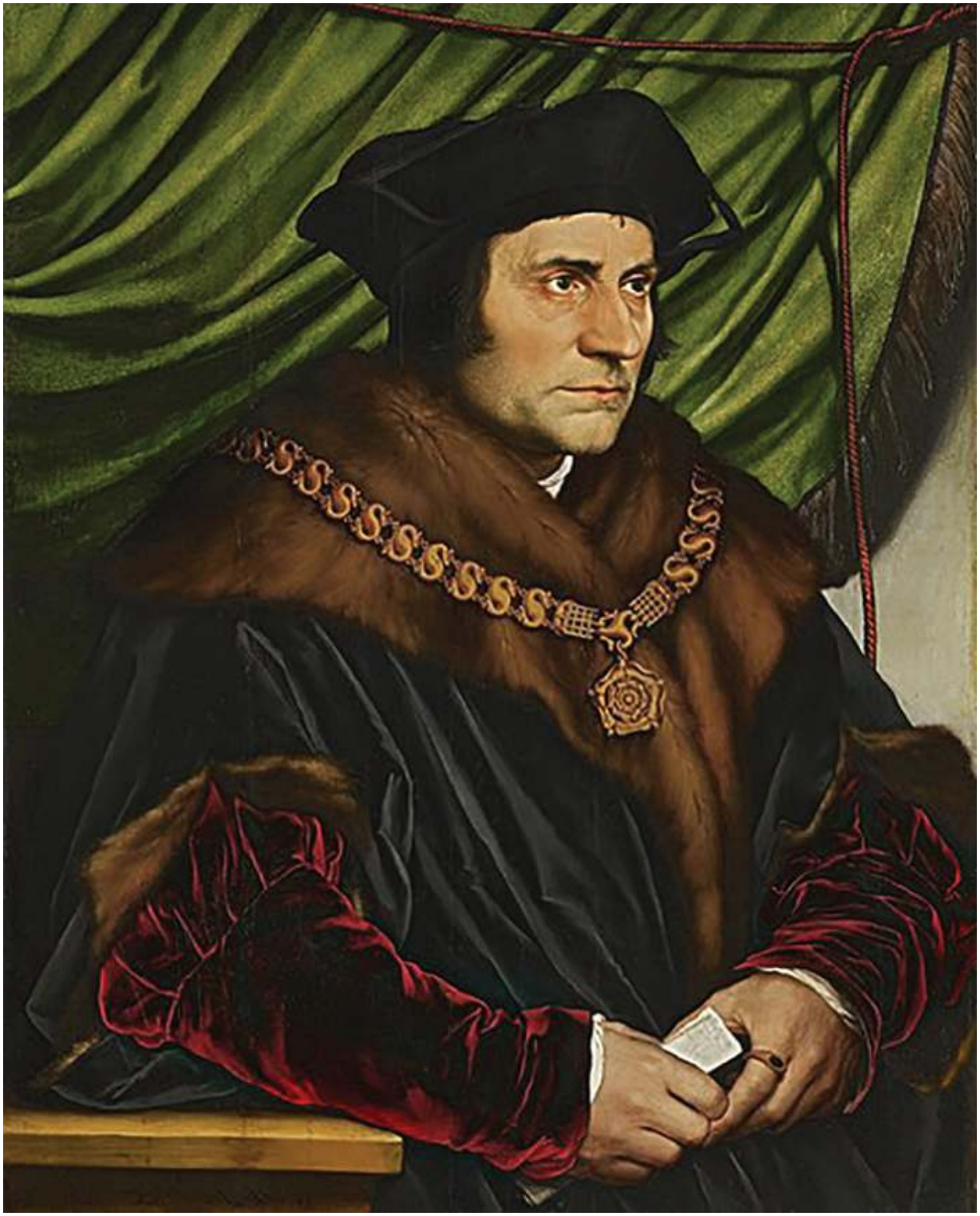
How do Books One and Two relate to each other? Book Two in narrative terms is the less complex, consisting mainly of Raphael's description of Utopia. More actually wrote this book first. Book One is a swirl of voices, in turn quizzical, curious, and disputatious, that together probe questions of practical politics and statecraft seemingly removed from the grand social vision of Book Two. It is telling that More began Book Two while on a sojourn away from his usual London life and turned to Book One when back in the city and immersed again in his legal and official duties. Book One frames Book Two by exploring how radical solutions can be made into reality. Can we hope for utopia in a world of imperfect politics?

This question has lain at the heart of utopian debates ever since, echoed in the argument between Raphael, More, and Giles about where visionaries should employ their talents. To maintain their ideological integrity, many utopians have since followed Raphael in wishing to stay aloof from the grubby, compromised world of politics.

At the end of Book One, the fictional More sets out a middle way. Raphael's social visions are speculative and abstract and hard to fathom for most people, says More. In the court of a king they would fall on deaf ears if expounded without taking proper account of the context. The problem is that such abstract philosophy lacks sensitivity to its setting and its audience – to the stage on which political life is played out. More instead advocates a philosophy that is tailored to the audience, one pursued by the wise visionary who realizes that though politics is imperfect there is no reason to stay aloof from it. Through tact and judgement one may manage things ‘so that, if you are not able to make them go well, they may be as little ill as possible’.

MORE'S CAREER DILEMMA

As More worked on Utopia, he was himself facing the question of



Hans Holbein's *Sir Thomas More* (1527), Frick Collection